

INTERNATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE RED CROSS

A LOOK AT THE INTERNATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE RED CROSS

INTERVIEW WITH LAURENT MARTI

The International Museum of the Red Cross will be inaugurated in a few days' time. This is an important event for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement—now the world's most universal humanitarian movement will have a place of its own where its past achievements and present activities will be brought to life.

The Museum's originator, Laurent Marti, spoke freely of "his" creation in an interview with Review editor Jacques Meurant.

Laurent Marti, born in Neuchatel, Switzerland, joined the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in 1964. First sent as a delegate to the Congo, he later headed ICRC delegations in the Middle East (1967, 1970 and 1971), Greece (visits to political detainees, 1968-1969), Bangladesh (1971-1972), Cyprus (1974), Lebanon (1976) and Chad (1977-1978, 1979, 1980).

During his missions, Laurent Marti was impressed by the often outstanding protection the Red Cross was able to afford to victims in extremely difficult circumstances. Each time he returned to Switzerland, he was equally struck by most people's total ignorance of the institution's work in the field.

With the support of several friends and the co-operation of UNESCO experts, he launched the idea of the Museum and, with their help, drew up a detailed proposal and organized an architectural competition. Since then, he has been actively involved in the implementation of the project, of which he is the Director.

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Q. *Mr. Marti, how do you feel as the Museum's inauguration draws near?*

A. The Museum is the outcome of about ten years of negotiations and work, so I am naturally pleased. However, my personal satisfaction is secondary to the broader context. The real questions are: will the Movement and Geneva be satisfied? Will the public and the media learn something new? Will young people find motivation?

Q. *I do not wish to play the devil's advocate, but a common, although perhaps simplistic, reaction is to wonder whether it was really necessary to build another museum when several already exist at famous Red Cross sites such as Castiglione, Solferino and Heiden. Although each of these Museums has its own specific purpose, they all possess great historical and even emotional value. So, why create the International Museum of the Red Cross?*

A. As you rightly pointed out, those museums have their own specific purposes. However, none of them sets out to convey visually the Red Cross and Red Crescent's 125 years of history. I value the Museums you mention and look forward to close co-operation with them. For example, groups of tourists might be interested in making a Red Cross journey, starting in Castiglione, passing through Geneva and ending in Heiden, where Henry Dunant died. This itinerary would not only be of historical interest, but would also take the participants through some wonderful scenery.

Q. *As with most large-scale undertakings, the concept and practical implementation of the Museum met with resistance, especially in the beginning. How did you react to this? Where did you find your often-praised determination and motivation?*

A. Can you think of any creation that has not immediately triggered reactions of scepticism or mistrust? This is only natural.

A creator can visualize every detail of his own creation. Others do not necessarily see it or appreciate it as he does. Furthermore, creation entails risks. There is no obvious reason why others should wish to share these.

I therefore believe you must be willing to weather a period of adversity and indifference before having the satisfaction of seeing people initially opposed to your idea won over by the demonstration of its viability. What you call my determination and motivation stems from this belief.

I would like to add one more thing: this "crossing of the desert" cannot be undertaken alone. A supportive team, such as the one I am

fortunate enough to have, is essential. My colleagues have now become my friends. Had they not helped me—I was about to say rescued me—I should have foundered mid-way.

Q. *The Museum is now a reality. Can you explain its goals and especially its content and structure?*

A. Let us begin with its activities. The Museum must not be a temple of self-satisfaction or serve merely to glorify the Movement. It must be a tool.

Let me explain: first of all, the ICRC and the Movement need volunteers and delegates. The Museum's exhibitions are intended to arouse enthusiasm in visitors, particularly the young. It must therefore be a tool for motivation.

Secondly, publicity increases any organization's chances of winning support. The Museum provides our institutions with an exceptional opportunity to become known.

Thirdly, when speaking of support, I also mean financial support. The Museum should stimulate contributions, convince governments.

It is thus an instrument favouring motivation, dissemination and fund-raising.

Its content must of course correspond to its purpose. Visitors will see engraved on the wall at the entrance a sentence which inspired all my missions and was taken from "The Brothers Karamazov" by Dostoyevsky: "Each one of us is responsible to all others for everything". This means that all men are directly responsible for and must concern themselves with everything that happens in the world. Human beings, whatever their political allegiance, cannot be divided into good and evil. Tolerance springs from this conviction.

The Museum's exhibits are imbued with tolerance. It is a Museum not of war, but of the humanitarian impulse. Every human being, however aggressive, finds somewhere within himself at a given moment a reason—some may call it self-interest, others the preservation instinct, still others generosity—but in any case a reason to help victims with impartiality, that is regardless of whether they are friends or enemies. What interests me is not the struggle, for example, of a Frenchman or an Englishman against a German, but the water the German brings to quench the thirst of that Englishman or Frenchman if he is wounded. This is what we hope to show in the Museum.

Q. Most people think of museums as being static. However, I gather this Museum boasts a dynamic and lively image. Visitors will not merely look; they will be encouraged to understand, explain, even participate in discussions. This calls to mind the remarkable Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam which not only uses the most advanced technology to display its masterpieces to full advantage, but also organizes debates, conferences, seminars and audio-visual shows.

A. You are right, a museum should be lively. In fact, we tried to replace the word “museum” with another term. This is possible in English, but very difficult in French. In any case, today’s public is accustomed to visiting modern museums.

I think this Museum will indeed be dynamic because it traces the history of the Red Cross through images. It is interesting to note that the history of photography and cinema runs parallel in time to that of the Red Cross, so the Museum also reflects the evolution of those media. We shall show striking images of Red Cross activities during events that have marked our times. The first film that visitors will see dates from 1898, the time of the Spanish-American War over Cuba. It contains scenes, of remarkable quality, showing Red Cross volunteers attending the wounded on the front lines. As the exhibition progresses in time, the technology used becomes increasingly sophisticated and powerful. I doubt there will be a dull moment as our story unfolds. As for discussions and audio-visual shows, we have an auditorium and a space for temporary exhibitions, which will be in use from the opening day.

Q. Let’s turn to money matters. We have heard it said—more in the past than now—that it was a luxury to build a Red Cross museum when the money invested could be better used to assist the victims of conflicts and natural disasters. What has been your answer to this? More generally, how did you manage to finance the building of the Museum?

A. First of all, I should like to stress most particularly that neither the ICRC nor any other Red Cross institution participated in any way in funding the Museum.

Indeed, we do not wish to give the impression that money contributed for Red Cross activities may have been used to construct a building. Our fund-raising campaign focused on attracting money that would never otherwise have gone to the Red Cross.

To do this we set up a sponsor system. We asked companies whether they would like to donate between 300,000 and 800,000 Swiss francs

and have their name appear at the entrance to an exhibition area. It was then up to the companies to decide whether this publicity operation was worthwhile. A museum, as opposed to a television commercial, offers publicity that is unlimited in time. We thought that sponsors might be interested in the 250,000 visitors expected annually.

This was undoubtedly true, since the Museum areas attracted sponsors very easily. Our fund-raising problem began when we ran out of areas. The money paid by the sponsors, usually from their publicity budgets, was, believe me, not earmarked for the Red Cross. The fact that we succeeded in obtaining it is, to my mind, a signal service rendered to our institutions.

Q. How will the Museum be run and staffed? Who will be its "customers"?

A. Our customers will be tourists, Red Cross and Red Crescent members from all over the world, schoolchildren, students in general and all those who have benefited or stand to benefit directly or indirectly from Red Cross activities; that is, everyone. I think the Museum will become one of Geneva's major attractions.

Since we are not subsidized by the State or by our institutions but are self-supporting, we shall charge an admittance fee with the usual reductions. To avoid a deficit, we have enlisted 60 volunteers to help in the Museum.

In conclusion, our adventure is unique. At the outset we had only an idea: no land, no building, no exhibits, no funds.

Today, we have achieved our goal. Only one thing remains to be gained, and it will be our very reason for existing; that is, public approval.

The satisfaction of creating something from nothing thus goes hand in hand with a desire to be useful. I leave you to judge.
